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Gated communities in South Africa: building bridges or barriers?

By
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Abstract

This paper describes the manifestation of gated communities in South Africa and its impact on the privatisation of public urban space, services and governance. Following this discussion, the paper contextualises gated communities within the spatial design theories of Post Modern Urbanism and then investigates the relationship between spatial transformation and territorial governance as expressed through gated communities in South Africa. It is clear from previous research that there is a relationship between the reconstruction of space (re-definition of boundaries and realms) and the recent growth of territorial governance in the country, as exemplified by the growth of home-owners associations, bodies-corporate and private firms managing enclosed or demarcated areas. The paper concludes with a discussion around the question of whether gated communities contribute to building bridges or barriers in South Africa.

Key words: Gated communities, South Africa, privatisation of public space, services and governance.

Introduction

South African cities are changing dramatically. The first all-inclusive elections marked the turning point and introduced a new era of democracy. The road to democracy is not without challenges. In the aftermath of political transition, the country faces many social and spatial changes, as well as challenges.

Dramatic political transition is often followed by social, economic and spatial transition as well. Comparisons² of the links between political transitions and the growth of crime have indicated remarkable links between political transition, rising crime levels, and socio-economic and spatial changes (Shaw 1997; 2000). South Africa faces huge challenges in terms of poverty, unemployment and high crime levels. It is estimated that more than 50% of the population lives below the poverty line and that more than 30% of the population is unemployed. Overall crime levels increased by almost 5% between 1997-98, 7% in 1998-99, and 7.6% in 1999-2000 (Shönteich 2002).

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² South Africa is but one of a number of countries that experienced political transition in the last decade or two. Other countries include several in Latin America, such as Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Peru, the former communist regimes of Eastern and Central Europe (for example Russia, Ukraine and Poland) and other African countries such as Nigeria and Mozambique.

South Africa also bears a legacy of segregation, which manifested in the development of separate areas for different population or race groups. This resulted in the exclusion of large sections of the population from economic, social and environmental benefits. The present government faces two particular challenges in this regard: to upgrade existing underdeveloped areas through provision of adequate infrastructure and services and to integrate these areas with the rest of the city. This would also indirectly contribute to crime prevention as the government acknowledges in a number of crime prevention strategies, promoting crime prevention through planning and design as part of local crime prevention strategies. Meanwhile, many citizens are responding in their own way. High levels of crime and the fear of crime, are giving rise to major changes in the urban landscape, such as defensive architecture and urbanism. Gated communities are transforming the face of South African cities.

There are various types of gated communities in South Africa. Broadly, they can be divided into two types, namely enclosed neighbourhoods (closing-off existing neighbourhoods) and security villages (private developments). Both of these have grown significantly during the past five years. All the metropolitan councils in the country have received applications for neighbourhood enclosures, some in large numbers. In Johannesburg alone, it is estimated that there are 300 road closures in metropolitan area at present. Only 79 applications have been received (under consideration) and 23 approved³. In many cases, neighbourhoods are closed off illegally. The areas that are closed off are also increasing in size, for example Gallo Manor in Johannesburg, a large neighbourhood with 24 street closures. A proposal for the closure of an area in Lombardy East (northeast Johannesburg) is also underway and should this be accepted, the enclosed area will include around 1000 houses. A number of applications for neighbourhood enclosures have also been received in smaller towns, such as Bethlehem and Mossel Bay.

Security villages are also becoming more popular among urban residents, especially in larger cities, such as Johannesburg, Pretoria, Durban, Cape Town and Vereninging. Some smaller coastal towns, however also have a high number of security villages, such as Pletenberg Bay (21) and Knysna (20). Gated communities contribute to spatial transformation in a very significant way, which in turn, has a great influence on urban governance at a local level.

Many questions arise. Why do gated communities occur? Are they linked to high crime rates? If so, are gated communities a way to implement Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED)? Can we then consider gated communities as a form of "defensible space" (Newman, in Anon 1996) or a way to define territoriality – one of the principles of CPTED (Newman in Anon 1996; Crowe 1991; Blakely and Snyder 1997)? Or are gated communities more than just a reaction to the fear of crime? Is it perhaps an expression of more general fears – the fear of rapid change, globalisation and of 'other' people (Ellin 1997; Caldeira 2000), or impressions that local governments are weak? In this sense it may be a response to equity issues and the redistribution of wealth, especially in South Africa. Can gated communities therefore be understood as a particular local expression of the reigning spirit of our time, namely Post Modernism and its manifestation in urban design through Post Modern Urbanism, as Ellin (1997) claims?

This paper describes the manifestation of gated communities in South Africa and then aims to contextualise it within the spatial design theories of Post Modern Urbanism. It then investigates the relationship between spatial transformation and territorial governance as expressed through gated communities in South Africa. It is clear from previous research that there is a relationship between the reconstruction of space (re-definition of boundaries and realms) and the recent growth of territorial governance in the country, as exemplified by the

³ A number of neighbourhood enclosures have been approved under the previous local authority for a period of two years and will have to be reconsidered after that period of time.

growth of home-owners associations, bodies-corporate and private firms (section 21 companies and private security firms) managing enclosed or demarcated areas.

Yet, few people appear to be concerned with the long-term consequences of privatised public space and governance in South Africa. Will they contribute to more effective urban governance and increased cooperation between different role-players (Foldavry 1994) or will the privatisation of urban space and governance lead to increased fragmentation and separation in already fragmented cities (Caldeira 2000; Bremner 1999)? This paper will conclude with a discussion around the question of whether gated communities contribute to building bridges or barriers.

Fortresses of fear

Why do gated communities occur? In South Africa, many residents firmly believe that gates and booms make people safer, and security is given as the main reason for neighbourhood enclosures and security villages. The closure of neighbourhoods, are in fact, only allowed for security reasons. Gated communities are also seen as a way to relieve the fear of crime. It is seen as a particular form of urban development that could address fear through features such as gates, fences, CCTV cameras, guards etc. This appears to be especially the case in South Africa. Booysen (2000) conducted a study in South Africa, where despite a lack of valid crime statistics, the majority of people in an enclosed neighbourhood felt safer after the enclosure. "People's perceptions of crime rates are closely linked to their perception of safety. People inside the enclave definitely feel that crime rates are lower in their area" (Booyesen 2000:61).

Gated Communities take the idea of Crime Prevention through Environmental Design (CPTED)⁴ to its extreme, by applying the principles of territoriality, defensible space, access control and image. In the case of enclosed neighbourhoods, existing neighbourhoods are closed-off through booms and gates across roads. Many are fenced or walled off as well, with a limited number of controlled entrances/exits and security guards at these points in some cases. The emphasis is thus on security. In fact, applications for neighbourhood enclosures can only be approved for security reasons. The roads within these neighbourhoods were previously, or still is public property and in many cases, the local council is still responsible for public services to the community within. These types of gated communities are often referred to as "road closures" in South Africa (Figure 1).

In this way, public urban space is privatised, whether formally or informally. A number of different models are currently being used to accommodate the closure of existing neighbourhoods in South Africa. These vary from more public to increasingly private approaches. Many local authorities have opted for a more publicly controlled and managed

⁴ Crime Prevention through Planning and Design is aimed at reducing the causes of, and the opportunities for, criminal events, as well as addressing the fear of crime, through the application of sound design and management principles to the built environment. In other words, it is based on the idea that certain design and management interventions in the built environment can make a difference in terms of crime prevention by reducing the opportunities for crime and improving the opportunities for policing. These interventions can furthermore influence the perception of people towards a specific area and in this way serve to lessen the fear of crime and as a consequence improve the use of a particular urban area or site. CPTED aims to reduce easy targets for those who commit crime on impulse, make it more difficult for potential offenders to reach their targets and to increase the chances of apprehension during or after a criminal act. This should be done through principles such as surveillance and visibility, territoriality and defensible space, access control, target hardening, etc. The result is that CPTED often leads to extensive and even severe forms of urban fortification, ranging from small scale interventions such as burglar bars on windows, security gates and perimeter fencing around properties, to the enclosure of entire neighbourhoods for security purposes.

approach to neighbourhood enclosures, where the public spaces within the enclosed areas, such as the roads and parks, still remains under the ownership of and are still maintained by the local authority. In most of these cases, neighbourhood enclosures, if approved, are only granted temporarily for a period of two years. In this case, public space is not formally privatised, but often controlled in such a way that it becomes semi-private spaces or operates as private space in reality.



Figure 1: Controlled access: an entrance to an enclosed neighbourhood in Johannesburg.

Other local authorities have developed two options or levels according to which applications can be approved, ranging from a public to a private approach. Option 1, for example, allows for the temporary (booms/gates) or permanent closure of streets in a particular neighbourhood, while the public areas are still owned and maintained by the local authority. Option 2, makes provision for the privatisation of all public spaces and in this case, the future ownership and maintenance would be taken over by the residents association. In this case, public space is formally privatised. Another example of formal privatisation is where one particular local authority has decided to only grant approval to request if the entire area under consideration is privatised. In this case, the previously public open space are rezoned as “private open space” and the ownership and maintenance of these areas (roads, open space, etc) are then entirely taken over by the residents/homeowners association. Municipal services are provided to the common property boundary with only one water-metre and sewer connection. Electricity, roads and storm-water are dealt with in the same way as sectional title developments.

Security villages, on the other hand, are private developments from the start. They include large luxury (mainly residential) estates (for example country or golf estates), office parks, smaller townhouse complexes and secured apartment blocks. These areas/buildings are physically walled or fenced off and usually have a security gate or controlled access point with a security guard. Security guards are required to scan all incoming vehicles and passengers and request their personal details to be filled into a register. The larger estates or office parks often have elaborately designed entrance gates, and security is strengthened by the use of CCTV cameras. The roads in these developments are private, and the management and maintenance, is carried out by a private management body. Again, the emphasis is on security (Figure 2).

Security villages often lead to the privatisation of communal space or what Webster (2001) refers to as “club realms”. These are “spaces in which shared goods are supplied as ‘tie-ins’ with private goods and supplied at efficient levels because they are efficiently priced” (Webster 2001:163). These communities are therefore, neither public realm, nor private realm, but a redefinition of both. In a sense, it is a limitation of one and an extension of the other (Ibid.), and thus private communal spaces. The aim of building security villages is

therefore, not only to secure space, both in the home and outside, but also to control these spaces.



Figure 2: Entrance to large security estate in Pretoria.

Posts of Power

Spatial transformation often leads to institutional transformation, or a change in the way in which spaces are managed or controlled. Gated communities in South Africa is a good example of this, where the privatisation of space often give rise to the privatisation of public services and governance as well.

In order to apply for neighbourhood enclosures in South Africa, residents need to establish some form of legal body. In most cases homeowners or resident's associations establish a Section 21 Company to manage the process and collect the application fees. The residents' association or Section 21 Company is responsible for all costs and matters relating to the proposed road or neighbourhood enclosure. In some cases these associations manage and control the affairs of their enclosed areas themselves, but in other cases they involve an outside party to do this, for example a security company or a non-profit organisation (Landman 2000).

The powers and functions of the managing body differ from case to case. In some cases the residents' associations also take responsibility for added functions such as neighbourhood clean-up campaigns, patrols, etc. In other cases they only manage and control the collection and payment of fees for the application and implementation of the specific neighbourhood enclosure. In some cases the enclosure of neighbourhoods goes hand-in-hand with the appointment of private security firms to patrol and secure the enclosed areas and man the controlled access points. Residents' fees then include the fees for the security company as well, which in some areas can amount to R40 000 (\pm € 4000) per month per area (Landman 2000).

Residents associations also control most large luxury security estates in South Africa. These associations take decisions regarding their areas and ensure that day-to-day management are carried out. They either appoint people from their own midst to perform management tasks or hire private consultants or administrators to do this. Estates are generally managed by a board of directors, appointed or elected by the Homeowners Association. The task of these directors varies from estate to estate but generally implies the management of financial aspects of estate, as well as the enforcement of rules, regulations and controls, such as ensuring compliance to aesthetic regulations, building restrictions, architectural style, character, design criteria, specifications, landscaping and land use control. In some cases

the everyday management of enclosed neighbourhoods and security villages are contracted out to private security firms. Apart from performing services related to security, such as access control, neighbourhood patrols and crime response, they are also often associated with the management of enclosed areas, taking the responsibility for managing services such as garden services, refuse collection, cleaning tasks, etc. Security companies therefore become multi-functional operators within enclosed areas.

Rules and controls form an important part of the management of gated communities. This is more the case in security villages than in enclosed neighbourhoods, since the first are purposefully designed to create and ensure a specific life-style. Control includes control of both visitors and residents. Strict control is exercised over visitors. Most people are asked to complete forms with their personal details and receive temporary permits to enter the area. Residents are also controlled. They have to adhere to strict rules set up by the residents association and enforced by the board of directors and private security.

In this sense, gated communities are not just a design of fear, but also seems to be a design of power. As such, it may be possible to link the occurrence of gated communities, not only to local factors, such as crime and insecurity in South Africa, but also to a much broader spirit of the time, namely Post Modernism and its spatial design component, often referred to as Post Modern Urbanism.

Fitting into the box: gated communities and Post Modern Urbanism

Post Modern architecture and urbanism is very diverse, but as Ellin points out, can be unified in a single thread, "a coherence ... based on the heterogeneous substance and nature of modern society" (1997:113). Post Modern Urbanism is therefore a re-action against modernism and its images of perfection and utopia (Giddens 1990; Coleman 1985). It becomes a specific approach to urban design in a specific period of time:

Rather than provide pat answers, postmodern urbanism seeks to raise questions and provoke or simply to accommodate post-industrial society rather than shape it (Ellin 1997:133)

Ellin summarizes the characteristics of Post Modern Urbanism: historicism (reaction to modernism's break with the past), contextualism (character of place and identity), use of symbolism, apoliticism⁵, anti-autocratic, art as a commodity, traditional building and use of familiar elements (1997:111-112). In short, whereas in modern design, "form follows function", in post modern design, "form follows fiction, fear, finesse and finance" (Ellin 1997: 10). Gated communities in South Africa are a typical example of this. It is the creation of secured and peaceful spaces (form follows fear) with a distinctive identity and style (form follows fiction and finesse) to ensure a specific lifestyle and provide social and economic control. This is done through the privatisation of public space, services and governance (form follows finance).

The result of many post modern urbanist interventions, such as gated communities, is a growing decline of meaningful public space and desire to control one's space. Whereas it once combined production, consumption and social interaction, public space have now become compartmentalised and transformed (Ellin 1997:167). Again, this is exactly what is happening in South Africa. It is evident from the discussion that the privatisation of space, manifested through various forms of gated communities, often leads to the privatisation of local control as well. This is often enforced by fortification and access control. Although this is

⁵ Ellin describes apoliticism as "... humility, a lack of faith and a search for something to believe in; anti-utopianism; believe perhaps in "vest utopias" or "heterotopias" (1997:112).

an international phenomenon, it finds a particular expression in South Africa and in turn, is likely to have a very particular impact.

Signs for the future

What does this mean for the urban future? It is clear from the discussion that spatial intervention and transformation often result in social and institutional transformation as well. The question is whether these changes will have a positive or negative impact on the future? What will be the long-term consequences of transformed public space and governance in South Africa? Will it contribute to more effective urban governance and increased cooperation between different role-players or will the privatisation of urban space and governance lead to increased fragmentation and separation in already fragmented cities?

On the one hand, territorial governance could assist local governments and release their burden in terms of service delivery and maintenance of infrastructure in enclosed areas. Private bodies-corporate or micro-governments as they are often called, could assist with the development of urban areas through infrastructure development and private service delivery. They could also assist the police by reducing their burden through hiring private security to patrol enclosed areas. Police resources can then be released to be used in other places. In this way, private governments⁶ could play a role in assisting local governments towards more efficient cities. Two questions however arise. More efficient cities for who, and at what cost?

On the other hand, there is a possibility that the privatisation of public urban space and governance could lead to increased spatial and institutional fragmentation and become a way in which private groups can resist integration and the redistribution of wealth within the new democracy. Comparative research with other developing countries has raised some concerns. Gated communities in Brazil have a considerable impact on urban transformation on various levels, in terms of spatial, social, institutional and political aspects. Spatially it is exacerbating urban sprawl, fragmentation and segregation. Many would argue that it is creating physical boundaries, or barriers all over the city. It is also leading to the privatisation of public space or the reservation of certain spaces for certain homogeneous social groups alone. In addition, it is changing the nature of the existing public spaces. People living in enclosed neighbourhoods no longer make use of the streets, and public spaces are no longer used and shared by all urban residents as in the past (both traditional public spaces outside enclosed areas, as well as communal spaces inside). Traditional public spaces are now abandoned to the poor, the homeless and the street children, who are left vulnerable to violence and abuse by various control groups, including criminals and security forces. Therefore, despite the transition to democracy, the pattern of spatial segregation still continues in many Brazilian cities, although now in a different form (Landman 2002).

In South Africa, many of the signs already point towards the possible development of similar scenarios as are experienced in Brazil today. Certain types of gated communities, due to their nature, size and location, are starting to contribute to urban sprawl, fragmentation and separation. They are creating physical barriers in many South African cities. As they increase in the future (both in numbers and size), so will their impact. This could have significant social repercussions, as was the case in Brazil, where fortified enclaves contributed to higher levels of inequality, fear, suspicion, as well as a feeling of vulnerability in those "outside" the boundaries. Fortified enclaves in Brazil also significantly contribute to the transformation of urban spaces; some public spaces are privatised (and so prohibit access), while others become neglected, abandoned and increasingly open to various forms of violence and in many cases illegal forms of control.

⁶ "Private government" is a contradiction in term, because "government" implies public sector and representation.

Control over urban spaces in South Africa, whether over controlled access areas or over remaining public spaces, is exercised by various groups, including the public police, private security guards, various vigilante groups and formalised management bodies such as bodies-corporate, home owners associations or private management firms (through CIDs/BIDs⁷). In Brazil, it has led to power struggles over territories and the use of various methods of control, many of which are illegal and a violation of human rights and citizenship. This raises many questions regarding the roles and responsibilities of various security/management groups for and within urban spaces and the role of the nature of urban space to facilitate certain forms of control.

It also raises questions in terms of the powers allocated to the residents' association and/or private security firm managing areas on behalf the residents. Homeowners associations are a powerful lobbying force. In many cases they resist taxation or demand tax rebates. Many also refuse to accept any major spending for citywide initiatives they may not directly benefit from. McKenzie (1994:186) states that "those paying for and receiving the private services can be expected to resent paying for duplicate public services they do not need...for this and other reasons, this 'privatisation for the few' has the potential for creating and amplifying social division and conflict between...residents and local governments". Such actions could have disastrous effects in South Africa where cross-subsidisation is essential for upgrading under-developed areas. A lack of sufficient resources (due to a smaller tax base, for example if residents of enclosed areas refuse to pay tax) could lead to further marginalisation of poor areas and the people living in them. This could contribute to increased social and economic exclusion of the poor. The question is therefore not whether the private sector can assist local authorities and thus making more resources available to apply in poorer areas, but how residents of private areas will react over time?

This brings one to the final question of whether gated communities contribute to building bridges or barriers.

Conclusion: gated communities in South Africa – building bridges or barriers?

The discussion showed that gated communities can build bridges between local governments and local communities when communities assist governments to provide and maintain certain services and infrastructure. This could also be the case in South Africa.

The main question, however, is at what cost and who will gain from these bridges? Are gated communities building bridges for the rich only? Is the poor then left to drown in a sea of increased poverty and violent, underdeveloped spaces without opportunities for employment or social upliftment? Or will redistribution prevent this? If not, it is more likely that gated communities in South Africa are building barriers in urban environments. They are changing the urban landscape and through the transformation of space, also lead to social and institutional transformation as well. Social transformation often gives rise to social and economic exclusion, while institutional transformation leads to territorial governance and initiatives from residents associations to take over some of the traditional roles of local government. This could contribute to fragmentation on an institutional level and may in the future create development barriers due to significantly reduced tax bases. In this way, gated

⁷ CIDs/BIDs stands for City or Business Improvement Districts. It represents a model whereby a certain geographically demarcated area is managed and controlled by a private firm and/or representative business/residents group to maintain and protect this area. This model is very popular in the USA, where it has been implemented in many downtown areas. It has also recently been implemented in Johannesburg, Cape Town and Pretoria.

communities in South Africa could ultimately challenge the very nature of democracy, as evident from studies of gated communities in Brazil (Caldeira 2002; Landman 2002).

Democracy is not only dependent on political democracy. Although the first step towards complete democracy (if one can call it that, considering that true democracy is arguably never 100% possible) is clearly political democracy, it can only be a first step. It is the first phase of a much longer process required to achieve a true or more balanced democracy. Thus democracy cannot only be political, but should also be institutional, socio-economic and spatial (Landman 2002). Thus, there is a need for democracy on a spatial level as well. This can be interpreted in two ways:

- *Spatial democracy*

Spatial democracy refers to the democratic distribution of facilities and services, such as infrastructure, sanitation, water, etc. to all urban areas. This is very closely related to socio-economic transformation. It also requires a paradigm shift institutionally (that is, institutional democracy). It requires constructive institutional reforms and strategies to guide urban development practices in such a way that these do not raise the needs of one group above those of another. It also necessitates the careful evaluation of all types of urban development according to the principles set out in the main urban development policies, such as the Urban Development Framework (1994), the Development and Facilitation Act (1995) and the White Paper on Spatial Planning and Land Use Management (2001), promoting spatial democracy.

- *Democratic space*

Democratic space refers to open, secure and well-developed public urban spaces for all urban residents where people should be able to mix with various groups and experience the benefits of urban environments. Again, the local authority has a major role to play in promoting and supporting the development of democratic urban spaces throughout the city. It is also needful to reconsider the contribution of security agents and private management bodies to democracy within these spaces, as well as the role of public private partnerships in promoting democratic space (Landman 2002).

In many aspects, South Africa has reached a respectable level of political democracy, where all people can vote and where there is a focus on addressing discrimination and promoting human rights. However, the danger is that increased crime, together with particular responses to crime, may in fact start to undermine the political achievements of the past seven years and undermine existing policies pointing towards spatial democracy and the development of democratic spaces. Are gated communities likely to produce democratic spaces and will they contribute to spatial democracy? Signs from initial research and comparisons with similar countries raise serious concerns, pointing to a preliminary conclusion that gated communities (at least in their present form) in South Africa are building barriers to democracy on many levels, especially on a city-wide scale.

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